

## **HR-369 Guidelines for County Engineers Decisions**

**Key Words: County Engineers, Engineering Practices, Maintenance**

### **Abstract**

There has been a great deal of concern by county engineers and supervisors over constrained budgets, lack of resources and a deteriorating infrastructure, as they affect the secondary road system in Iowa. In addition, public input and/or political pressure have been increasing over the years. This study was initiated to determine the most important issues facing counties and document the way in which various Iowa counties have been addressing those issues.

The list of issues was developed through meetings of county engineers and supervisors in each of the Iowa Department of Transportation (DOT) regions around the state. Questionnaires were sent to all engineers and supervisors statewide asking them how the various issues (e.g. snow and ice removal policies, Level "B" roads, and so on) were handled in their respective counties. The responses were then compiled into this document.

This is a reference document that should promote uniformity among counties by letting them know how other counties are handling various issues. It may assist counties in answering inquiries from constituents, determining policies or procedures, and provide personnel with a reference document.

The subjects selected and used include: County Policies, Ordinances, Resolutions Snow and Ice Removal Policy Dust Control Privatization of Services Level "B" Roads Vacating Roads Rural Development Private Entrance Construction and Maintenance Roadside Management Practices Right of Way Encroachments and Easements Personnel Matters, Staff and Organization Communicating Information to Citizens Supervisor/Engineer Relations County Leasing/Purchasing Practices

### **Level B Roads**

Many Iowa counties have Level "B" minimum maintenance roads and they are working well. The choice of the roads to consider for designation as Level "B" should be low volume traffic roads that do not serve a residence or other purpose requiring frequent access. Liability questions arising from Level "B" roads are negligible and very few lawsuits have been filed. Counties that do not currently have Level "B" roads should consider them.

Counties that do have Level "B" roads should periodically review their policies and the list of roads they have designated for additions or deletions as conditions require.

### **Snow and Ice Removal Policy**

Nearly all counties have adopted the Iowa State Association of Counties (ISAC) Snow and Ice Removal Policy. Those that have not should seriously consider doing so. All counties should review their policies periodically to make them conform to actual practices. There has been good experience with liability issues. Existence of a written policy has in all probability discouraged the filing of law suits in many cases.

### **Dust Control Policy**

Most counties have a dust control policy. The most popular material used is calcium chloride, however, lignin sulfite is also widely used. Cost and effectiveness are major factors in selecting the type of material to use. Permit applications are sometimes made by the property owner and sometimes by the contractor, but in nearly all cases a private contractor applies the material.

Most counties apply dust control materials at their own cost when excess traffic is created by construction and/or detours. A few have done so along roads running by rural churches and cemeteries.

## **Privatizing Services**

There are some services that are seldom contracted out to private contractors such as snow removal, equipment maintenance, construction inspection, surveying, and right-of-way (ROW) acquisition. By the same token there are some services that are done by private contractors most of the time. These include application of dust control materials, road construction, crack sealing, seal coating, and solid waste collection/disposal.

The trend over recent years has been to increase the number of privatized services. Each county should review its policy annually. Those counties which are not currently contracting out for services should consider doing so at least on a trial basis.

## **Ordinances, Resolutions and Policies**

Most counties have ordinances, resolutions, and policies covering critical items such as snow and ice control, traffic control devices, and Level "B" roads. There are, however, several policies that are common past practices which are not a matter of written record. Few counties have policy manuals that are complete and indexed.

It is recommended that each county develop a policy manual that contains all applicable ordinances, resolutions, and policies. Those county engineer offices interviewed that did not have a manual indicated their preference would be to have a written document outlining all policies and procedures.

The following guidelines were suggested to decide whether to enact an ordinance or a resolution. Each was developed from information received from various counties, ISAC and the Iowa DOT.

### ORDINANCE   RESOLUTION

Long term   Shorter term

Requires 3 readings   Easier to implement

County wide application   Establishes policy on a particular issue

Perhaps required by Enforcement is not a concern.

Cannot be fined for failure to comply.

Establish law by ordinance   Modify attachments by resolution

Regulate other people's actions   Declares how county will

act toward others

## **Equipment Purchasing and Leasing**

Most counties use standard specifications when purchasing equipment. There is sharing and loaning of equipment between counties and also some sharing of equipment with cities. County engineers should consider producing a list of specialized equipment and circulating it to others in the area. This might lead to more opportunities for sharing.

## **Right-of-Way Encroachments**

It is apparent that there are numerous ROW encroachments by adjacent landowners, but most are not serious. It appears they are being handled in a manner commensurate with the severity of the problem. This ranges from ignoring the problem through discussions and letters to the landowner to legal action. Attention should be given to those encroachments that jeopardize safety and those that interfere with drainage and cause extra maintenance.

Utility permits are required before construction. There seems to be considerable variation in the designated location of utility lines.

## **Entrances**

The trend over the last several years has been for counties to exercise more control over the construction of entrances and to require landowners, not the counties, to bear the cost. There has been an effort to reduce the number of entrances and control their locations for safety considerations, particularly on the heavier traveled roads. All counties should require a permit for new entrance construction and the cost should be borne by the party who benefits, the landowner.

## **Roadside Management**

Most counties have their roadside management activities located in the county engineer's office. Even if it is not, there needs to be close coordination. It was noted that the practice of planting prairie grasses is expanding.

*Mowing:* There are a few counties that mow the entire ROW on paved roads. Many other counties have abandoned that practice for economic reasons and because many of their constituents prefer a more natural look for roadways. Those that still mow all the ROW should re-evaluate that practice.

Mowing the shoulder is a good practice for safety reasons and to provide a clear roadway for snow to blow away in the winter. It is also necessary to spot mow for weeds.

*Ditch Cleaning:* Nearly all counties have a policy covering ditch cleaning. Those that do not should adopt one. Each counties practices should conform to the severity and nature of the problem. In any case, the counties should use the dirt as they see fit.

## **Rural Developments**

Most of the counties that have a potential for rural developments have a policy covering requirements. Those counties that do not should adopt one. It is difficult to establish a policy for improvement of roads serving new developments, but counties should have some sort of policy so they are not unexpectedly faced with problems.

## **County Engineer/Board Relations**

Most counties have a regular spot on the board agenda for the engineer. Complaints received by board members are passed on to the engineer's office for handling. Both of these procedures are as they should be.

## **Personnel and Staffing**

Employees in a majority of counties are unionized. There have been relatively few grievances. Negotiation of union contracts are most often done by an outside negotiator, many times with the cooperation of the county engineer, supervisors, or others. Hiring of employees is generally done by the engineer or in a few cases a personnel officer, with the approval or concurrence of the board.

## **Overall Conclusions and Recommendations**

The county engineers and supervisors of Iowa have long shared information and experiences with each other to enhance efficiency, quality and service in the secondary road area. Many times when a new problem emerges, they have worked toward a solution in a group effort. They have all been willing to share their experiences.

This study has illustrated that kind of cooperation and sharing. The group determined the most important problems in the secondary road area, then provided the information on how each handled those problems. It was discovered that all counties share nearly the same set of problems.

The information in this document should be useful as a reference document on how counties in general have acted regarding their most important issues and will be a guide for each county to review its own policies and procedures.

It is recommend that all county engineers review these subjects with their Boards of Supervisors. It is also recommended that this information be discussed at a series of regional meetings. Since the most important problem list was developed and later discussed at this type of meeting, the cycle would then be completed. There may be some merit to a presentation at a statewide meeting in addition to or instead of the regional meetings.